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Public health and the value of disobedience

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ABSTRACT

The writings of a sixteenth century French teenager may seem a stretch for a public health readership, but Etienne de la Boétie's treatise on Voluntary Servitude explains why unjust systems prevail and how they can be changed. They prevail, he shows, because we let them (the losers always vastly outnumber the winners); and they change when we retract our permission (as Ghandi demonstrated). These vital insights have inspired progress down the centuries – the enlightenment philosophers, the French Revolution, Tolstoy, the American civil rights movement as well as the Indian struggle against the British Empire. In an era when widening inequalities have become all too apparent, and the harm this does to the commonweal much better understood, this paper argues that La Boétie's analysis retains all its power and can inspire a new vision for public health.

Voluntary servitude in the 21st century

In 1548[c] French writer Etienne de la Boétie,[1] at the age of 18, set about explaining what is the great mystery of political science: why are we all so obedient? Throughout history he observed, regardless of polity, the vast majority of the population acquiesce to a tiny minority. This minority is not special in any way – in La Boétie's words they have '*only two eyes, only two hands, only one body, no more than is possessed by the least man among the infinite numbers dwelling in your cities*'. And it matters not how they attain power; autocracies and democracies are alike in this respect: the power of the elite is utterly dependent on the cooperation of the populace; those at the top have '*nothing more than the power that you* [and I] *confer upon*' them.

Recent debates about the divisions in our society show that La Boétie's observations retain their resonance. When Joseph Stiglitz[2] warns about the 'inequality of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%', and that this tiny proportion of the US population now controls 40% of the national wealth, the passivity of the population is perplexing. When the UK has become as economically divided as it was when Charles Dickens wrote Hard Times,[3] the absence of protest is remarkable. When Thomas Pickety provides a blow by blow account of this unfairness and argues that it betrays a systemic problem – the 'contradiction of capitalism' - our quiescence is startling.[4]

La Boétie's answer to his own question also stands up to contemporary scrutiny. He argues that the elite uses four basic techniques to ensure the 99% remain passive: the ready provision of both bread and circuses, a cloak of symbols and mysticism and the systematic reward of collusion. These still pertain today, with the only difference that they have been

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[c] Michel de Montaigne says 1546, making La Boétie only 16 when he picked up his pen.
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monetized and deployed on an industrial scale. Modern marketing has ensured that bread and circuses - ultra processed food (as well as innumerable tobacco and alcohol products) and undemanding entertainment - have become ubiquitous (though we now pay for what was once freely bestowed by the Caesars); mystification is furnished by the multinational advertising industry, and the attractions of collusion now recruit not only millions of marketing professionals, but, thanks firstly to stakeholder marketing we in public health, and secondly to social media and 'relationship marketing',[5,6] consumers themselves.

Finally La Boétie's solution still makes complete sense: we simply need to end our collaboration; we should retract our permission. In 21st century terms this means we should stop being consumes and start being citizens. The job of public health is to facilitate this change – to encourage the critical thinking, independence of spirit and self-actualisation it requires. This individual rekindling has to be matched with regulatory change; in particular regulation of the marketing forces that would push us back into passivity and obedience. These two approaches are symbiotic: in a democracy, the most effective way to bring about regulatory change is by popular demand; and enlightened regulatory change stimulates critical awareness.

Bread, circuses and corporate marketing

Despite his 500 year absence, the world of consumer capitalism would hold few surprises for La Boétie. For those of us with money, we '*sharers in his plunders*', the crumbs we get from the rich man's table, seem pretty good. We can get virtually anything we want: year-round fresh vegetables, beer from countries we've never heard of and cheap flights to all the ones we have. We can telephone our friend in Guatemala, use the same device to watch movies on the bus to work and rejoice in the knowledge that this palm-sized box has more processing capacity than was needed to land the first man on the moon. Our houses are heated (or cooled) to perfection, whatever the weather, our SUVs will take the roughest of terrain in their stride and our designer jeans will combine raw materials and labour from a dozen countries just to ensure our bums do not look big in them – despite the super-abundance of ultra-processed food.

All this happens thanks to marketing.

Marketing is often used as a synonym for advertising, a collective noun to take in TV commercials, public relations, pop-ups, sponsorship, merchandising, sales pitches and all the other forms of commercial publicity we encounter everyday of our lives. However, extensive and influential though this promotional activity is, it comes nowhere near describing the true nature and power of marketing; it is just the axiomatically visible tip of the iceberg. Marketing takes in not just promotion, but everything a business does to encourage us to buy its products and services. It combines a potent idea with a tempered and well-honed set of tools.

The idea is elegantly simple: marketers have worked out that it is much more effective to produce what you can sell than it is to sell what you happen to produce. And having done this successfully once or twice, the customer begins to trust you, so it is easier to repeat the exercise. The rhetoric of marketing is therefore reassuringly democratic: 'consumer sovereignty', 'value provision', 'customer service', 'freedom of choice', 'consumer satisfaction'; we even refer colloquially to shopping as 'retail therapy'. The language becomes more grandiloquent in the mouths of academics, but remains equally emollient: a recent conference of business thinkers spoke of 'value co-creation', 'equality of resource integration', 'empowered customers' and 'integrating value to make our lives better'.[7] La Boétie points out that tyrants down the ages have reigned by giving their underlings a (small) part of the spoils; that tyranny is itself co-created.

Soothing words are backed by perpetual activity. Marketers dedicate themselves to studying, understanding and developing the means to satisfy our needs. Focus groups, surveys, online monitoring – studies of every shape and size - are deployed to get inside our heads and hearts. Implicit in this is the recognition that we are all individuals and so a degree of customisation is needed if satisfaction is to be maximised. This requires more research, more 'customer insight', so that we can be segmented into reasonably homogenous groups and then targeted with bespoke offerings. Products and services are designed with us in mind, these are distributed and displayed (placed) with ubiquity and skill, priced at a level that best matches our sense of value and promoted to draw attention to all these benefits. These four Ps (product, place, price and promotion) form the marketing mix which is carefully and collectively manipulated to maximise our satisfaction. Excellent customer service makes sure that we don't just get desirable products and services, but that we acquire them in a way that is itself pleasant and satisfying. So marketers win our custom by meeting all our expectations – even those we haven't yet imagined - in a way that makes us feel good about ourselves and our consumption. We are lovin' it, every little is helping and we do feel we are worth it.[d] Thus, in La Boétie's terms, do we voluntarily embrace our servitude; and corporate marketing ensures we do this on a scale and with an enthusiasm unparalleled in history.

This process has become increasingly systemic in recent decades, as marketers have come to realise the profitability of turning ad hoc transactions into 'mutually beneficial relationships'. Mutual in that we get the products and services we want, and the marketer gets our loyalty and the consequent long term business opportunities. In this way, companies can not only address our current requirements, but also anticipate our future ones, greatly enhancing their strategic planning capacity. The concept of 'relationship marketing' has taken the business world by storm in the last thirty years, as the plethora of loyalty schemes and cards demonstrate. One business academic even went so far as to compare such long term marketing campaigns with marriages.[8] But this is a debasement of the word relationship. La Boétie reminds us that '*friendship is a sacred word, a holy thing*' which '*flourishes not so much by kindnesses as by sincerity*'. There is nothing sincere about a Tesco Club card or an Airmiles deal – these are just self-interested, commercially calculated pitches dressed up as generosity. La Boétie explains how tyranny

[d] These refer to the marketing slogans of McDonalds, TESCO and L'Oreal respectively.